

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 7, Issue 2, February 2019

www.ijellh.com

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Diaspora, Dislocation and Dilemma in Roma Tearne's Bone China

Abstract: Roma Tearne is a Sri Lankan born novelist. There is a strong interrelatedness for Tearne between the themes of loss, longing and memory. Tearne's novel is a family saga which covers the four generations of a Tamil de-Silva family. The novel gyrates around the war torn Sri Lanka and England. They are the displaced, powerless and the alienated others in the imaginary homeland. Tearne in her novels has characterized the second generation as going in search for their roots to their homeland as one's roots are always the solution for one's identity.

Key Words: Rootlessness, Identity, Homeland, Host Land, Alienation, Second Generation, Discrimination

According to Neera Singh, "The term diaspora was originally used for the Jews which meant dispersal from their homeland but now it is applied as a metaphoric designation of all expatriates, refugees, exiles and immigrants, whose lives, language and experience have been

altered by the paradigms of bilingualism, biculturalism and geographic dislocation.” They are caught physically between the two places their native and the host land but the double marginalization of not belonging to any place creates a deep void in them. Isolation and the longing for the past leads them to a state termed ‘unhomed’. She states that, “ The condition of being “unhomed” is associated further with alienation, a desire to reclaim the past yet revolt against it, the inability to move out, and the urge to show solidarity to the homeland but unwillingness to threaten relations with the host country (Neera, “ Diasporic Writing The Dynamics of Be/ Longing” 9)

Vijay Mishra uses the term ‘Diasporic imaginary’ to refer back to the old homeland. Mishra argues that the diasporic subject creates an imaginary homeland. The imaginary homeland becomes a fantasy structure, through which society sees itself as a homogenous entity. The migrant in the diaspora views the old homeland through a lens of fantasy, where the old homeland functions as an ideal homeland, a homeland where the migrant can feel comfortable. He refers to a dichotomy between the new homeland and the old homeland.

Roma Chrysostom Tearne is born in 1954 in Colombo only a few years after the independence of Sri Lanka, still officially known at the time by its British colonial name, Ceylon. Her father, a Tamil poet, and her mother, a Sinhalese journalist, secretly marry despite the scandal that could be caused by their different ethnic and religious origins. Her parents are disowned by their respective families. They became social outcasts. The young Tearne is raised in English rather than Tamil or Sinhalese by her parents, who are both passionate about the language. She affirms as a child that she will study English and become a writer. When Roma is ten years old, her father is discriminated by the Sinhalese majority. He leaves for Britain, soon followed by mother and daughter who embarks a long sea voyage to reach Britain and settle in growing cosmopolitan south London.

Attaining Education in Britain from the age of ten, Tearne integrates easily into British life and culture. In two interviews with *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, she recalls: ‘so out went the Asian accent, the memories of frangipani and all desire to wear a sari’, whereas her parents struggled to adapt and felt a ‘terrible sense of loss.’ She grows up in Brixton where she goes to the local comprehensive school. She has always been an avid reader and her regular trips to the local library shape her literary world. As a kid she feels reluctant to turn back to her Asian roots and her father encourages her to read novels written by Indian novelists.

Roma Tearne is known for capturing the socio-political unrest of her country in her fictions. Sri Lanka has always remained a volatile source of Civil War between the Tamils and the Singhalese. The Tamils are the minority in Sri Lanka while the Singhalese dominates the nation. After independence in 1948, the Singhalese Govt. passed certain discriminatory laws and acts which deprived the Tamils of their rights in the country. A whole lot of Tamils are deported back to India while the others stay back without proper citizenship. Sinhala is declared the official language for which the Tamils could not find suitable jobs or avail good education.

The Tamils are indirectly barred from being entitled to higher education or any dignified job. In the process, most of the Tamil families start migrating and taking refuge in foreign countries.. Right from its inception on 23rd July 1983 to 2009, LTTE fought for long twenty six (26) years to create an independent Tamil state called Tamil Eelam in the North and East of the island and resorted to nefarious activities, like assassinating, mass killing or genocide and so on. After twenty six years (26) years of rigorous military campaigning, the Sri Lankan military succeeds in defeating the Tamil Tigers in May 2009, bringing the Civil War to an end.

In the novel, Tearne introduces three generations of the De Silva family, who have tragically lost the ownership of tea plantation after independence. They are not able to withstand the language law imposed by the Singhalese government and the three sons flee to London, a dream destination. However, they only experience resentments and disappointments in London in the 1960s. They are the displaced, helpless, and alienated others in the foreign land. The only grandchild of the family, Anna-Meeka, finally succeeds in coping with the changing environment and grows to make a home of her own in that foreign land.

She got married to Henry Middleton, an Englishman who was in love with her deeply and honestly. Still, she craved for her distant homeland, She needed to see her home once more. She needed to see that long-forgotten place, with its sweet, soft sound of the ocean, its wide sweep of beaches, and its clear tropical skies...she saw that the things that had been mislaid, the history that had been buried and the memories no longer spoken of, all these things, were somehow being given back to her (Tearne, "Bone China" 399-400).

The 'loss of history' is in fact the central theme of the novel *Bone China*. Tearne reflects on the devastating sense of loss experienced by the De Silva family who migrates to England and how the family suffers culturally. The family realizes that its sense of history is interlinked with the present identity, which it must discard to move ahead. Identity Crisis, Alienation, Rootlessness suffered by her characters is a reading of her own state of mind. All the novels of Roma Tearne have the Sri Lankan Civil War as a backdrop with the trauma the people endured. Tearne's novels carry at their hearts a union of lost identities, cultures, race, diverse ideologies and a mixture of old and new social, political and national conceptualizations.

In *Bone China*, Tearne writes a family saga that was admittedly inspired by her own family history and spans two countries and three generations of the de Silva a Catholic family. The first part of the novel is set in Sri Lanka and revolves around the matriarch Grace, who, under the growing threat posed by the civil war strives to keep the family together. In the second part the novel shifts to Thornton, and his wife Savitha who struggle to make a home in Britain for their little daughter Anna Meeka. Loss and nostalgia are overpowering feelings and are tempered by the healing power of memory.

Savitha recreates a Sri Lankan atmosphere in her flat and preserves her customs by cooking with typical Sri Lankan ingredients whose ‘smells were of home’, “For a moment no one could speak. Savitha had been cooking, it was not much, but the smells were of home. Even twenty - one days and an expanse of water had not altered the smells they once knew. (Tearne, “*Bone China*” 191). Savitha takes great care in handling the precious bone china representing the family heirloom, which she had been handed over by her mother in law on the eve of her departure for Britain: She begins pouring tea into their lovely bone-cups. The papery bone china signifies Savitha’s own helplessness and symbolizes the fragile existence of displaced people who resemble delicate, brittle objects.

The novel has Sri Lanka and London in the background of the novel. Grace de Silva and Aloysius have five children. The peace that existed in the family disappears, and the civil unrest in Sri Lanka forces her children into moving to London where they have to try to adapt to the cultural diversity that confronts them. The exception is Frieda who stays to look after her parents in their home. The characters that dominate the novel are Grace and Savitha, her daughter-in-law. Grace is externally as fragile, delicate and beautiful as the bone china, which she tries to preserve as a family heirloom. She handovers the bone china to her granddaughter Anna -Meeka to be safe guarded for the future generation.

In all the novels of Tearne, she has depicted the life of the Tamils and the Sinhalese. Tearne brings forth the characteristic traits of belonging to the Sinhala and Tamil group. Being an offspring of both the groups she mentions the discriminations each group have to suffer on their own parts. The native dress codes of the people were followed even when they had to migrate to London. They were being called in a common phrase as ‘South Indian’. In the novel *Bone China*, Tearne mentions the common trade name as ‘Indians’ given to the natives who went to work in London. Savitha who tried to earn a living in London decided to join for work. Being accustomed to the traditional sari she went to the job dressed in a sari. She was recommended not to wear a sari to work as it wouldn’t be safe there. She was asked to wear trousers like other women who worked there. The freedom of wearing a dress of their choice is obstructed to them.

Savitha recollects with anguish how her boss Rosenberg introduced her to Indian women and told her that they were from her country. “There you go, Savitha, ‘he said. ‘ I’ve got a couple of your countrymen so you can be ‘appy. Don’t say I don’t give you nuffin!’ ” (Tearne, “*Bone Chine*” 216). Savitha describes the Indian women,

Yesterday afternoon, during one of the short and difficult -to- negotiate tea breaks, two new recruits were introduced to them. Indian women both of them, wearing baggy red silk trousers, their hair was heavily oiled with ghee and plaited along the length of their backs. Looped gold earrings and startling fluorescent bangles moved discordantly on their arms. Mr Rosenberg introduced them first to the group and then singled out Savitha. (Tearne, “*Bone China*” 215-216)

Aloysius remarks how he is useful to the British earlier and now as war is rising. He no longer has any position in the plantation and is forced to relinquish from there. The plight of the people is discussed by Tearne. The labourers who have given their blood and soul to

develop the plantation are asked to leave their job. Aloysius sadly mentions, “The fact is, I’m no longer necessary to the British. We were useful as sandbags, once, ‘ he continued sounding more confident than he felt.... Now, they have their damn war looming, they don’t need me’ “(Tearne, “Bone China” 6).

The British, after their invasion of the Island, treats Sri Lanka as one single unit of administration under one central authority. Tamil people are settled in Sri Lanka in large numbers. A large number of Tamils, due to their advancement in education take employment in the civil services to emerge as a special privileged social class. The Sinhalese on the opposite side, lacking in modern education, enter agriculture and other rural jobs. A feeling of isolation develops for the Sinhalese within their native place. Tamils thus settle in the Island in the hope of a better future.

As the Tamils are given high preference over the Sinhala majority the people develop internal conflicts in their minds. They aren’t ready to accept the fact of their children loving from the Tamils and the Tamils, on the other hand, aren’t ready to accept Sinhalese into their own family. The Sinhala feel that even in marriage they are considered as a degraded category. The Sinhalese develop a deep hatred on the Tamils due to the importance and privilege given to them by the British. Grace’s father always warns her not to have a relation with Aloysius as he is a Tamil.

‘He will drink your fortune away, Grace,’ her father had said.’ The British will give him special privileges because of his charm, and it will go To his head. He will not be the husband you think.’ Her father had not Wanted her to marry Aloysius. He had tried to stop her, but Grace had a stubborn

Streak. In the end, her father, who could deny her nothing, had given in.(
Tearne,

“Bone China” 7)

The natives recollect the reminiscences of their homeland. The peaceful days with their family still exist in their minds. Their migration to other places creates a deep void in them. The love and care of the family members linger in them. The migrants long to return to their own homeland. The hope for a better future for the future generation instills them to migrate to other places. They migrate to other places due to the internal conflict between the Tamils and the Sinhalese.

In the novel Bone China, memories of the homeland completely shatter Savitha. She recalls how she used to walk her daughter Anna-Meeka back from school in the Island. In the UK her daughter never wants her mother to do the same. “This feeling was different. Ceylon appeared to belong to another life. Savitha felt as though she had been cast adrift, abandoned in ways she had not thought possible. All that she had lost appeared before her, vast and incommunicable” (Tearne, “Bone China” 207).

Aloysius gets agitated on the fact how the British people maximum used the Tamil people and how when the riots broke out they gave preference to the Natives. He comments, “ ‘ The old ways are finished. These fellows have no need for courtesy, Or good manners. Life as we have known it will shrink, we’ve been sucked dry like a mango stone!’ ” (Tearne, “Bone China” 39).

The importance given only to the Tamils creates a deep revenge in the Sinhalese which results in them fighting for a Sinhala only state for them. In the novel Bone China, Aloysius mentions of how the resentment of the Sinhala majority leads into a war and the complete excavation of the Tamils from the Island, “He didn’t want to frighten Grace but rumours of a different kind of war were circulating. Sinhalese resentment grew daily, a resentment which would demand acknowledgement. Soon, they would be the majority, with unstoppable power over the Tamils”(Tearne, “ Bone China” 28).

Aloysius explains to Grace how the Tamils would be completely removed from their post. English which is now used as a common language for communication will become a language of the past. The moment Sinhalese wins the Island as their own they would develop their own religion and Sinhalese will become the language for communication and a change will develop were even the Tamils will have to speak Sinhalese.

Jacob the son of Aloysius and Grace even after the Sinhalese invasion worked in the Tea board. As he knew Sinhalese, he could survive in the work. Even though he could stay back in the job he wants to leave the job and move off to the UK for a better future. Christopher the brother of Jacob never wants to remain in England, he feels that he was destroying his own future and thus decides to leave for the UK. The reason he tells his mother Grace is that the native people have no consideration for the fellow human beings. He trusts that the condition will not be the same case in the UK and that he could prosper after going there, “‘At least I’ll find justice there!’ he said.’ They have laws. Laws that work. They’re English, aren’t they? Decent English people. They care about the poor. They care about their people’ ”(Tearne, “ Bone China” 134).

Ranjith, the new Underssecretary of State for the Sri Lankan government commented on the state of the nation as well as the de Silva family. According to him Sri Lankans are considered complex. “‘You fellows on the outside see Sri Lanka as an appendage of India, but you know, it has a legal code introduced by the Dutch. And then of course it had the British.’ He sighed. ‘Two Thousand years of Buddhism interfered with, gone wrong.... The personal tragedies of the de Silvas are mirrored all over the island, you know,’ he said, at last. “‘There’s been a huge loss of dignity, a sense of alienation. Everyone there is depressed to a greater or lesser degree””(Tearne, “Bone China” 302)

Sri Lankan diaspora are migrants from Sri Lanka who have moved to different parts of the world. It is a product of several journeys. In the novel *Bone China* the de Silva family first migrates to Colombo when they fear that the war would tear the Island apart.

And so, as the rumours of impending war on the island grew stronger,
.....In this way the de Silva family cast out from the cradle where they had
lived for so long, moved south to Colombo. To a white house with a sweeping
veranda close by the railway line where the humidity was very often
oppressive, but where the sweet, soft sound of the Indian Ocean was never far
away .(Tearne, “ Bone China” 16-17)

Jacob the first son of Grace and Aloysius always detests staying in Colombo, “There was nothing more to say on the subject. These days his only ambition was to leave this wretched place and sail away to the United Kingdom” (Tearne, “Bone China” 31). The end of the Civil War results in complete discrimination and alienation of the Tamils. They tried to pack off all the Tamils by removing them from their jobs.

‘All the foreign rule we’ve been subjected to is bound to affect us a country,’ Sunil continued. ‘We have become a confused nation. What we desperately need now is free state education. For everyone.’ He was talking to them all, but it was Alicia he was looking at.’ Sinhalese, Tamils, everyone,’ he said .(Tearne, “Bone China” 58)

Christopher, son of Aloysius and Grace takes his initiative to leave his homeland and go for a better future to England. When he goes to England he understands the importance of his homeland. He longs for his homeland as he feels that he doesn’t belong to England. As he knows that his brothers too are waiting to reach England in hope of a better future, he advises them that it is best to stay back in one’s homeland. “Believe me, there is nothing here for any

of us. I don't belong here and never will. There is no point in any of you coming. Better to stay and fight for what is ours" (Tearne, " Bone China" 140) .

Anna- Meeka after moving to England always longs to go to her home. She couldn't accept the changes in England in the beginning. To her home means Sri Lanka, she always has a longing for the Island. Even though she stays in England she demands rice and curry to eat rather than western food. "' I'm hungry,' she said. 'Can I have some Rice when we get back?' . She had nearly said ' get back home' but....the word 'home' was beginning to confuse her too" (Tearne, "Bone China" 205). Meeka's description of the home gives back a 'history' which has been buried within. She remembers the memory which no longer is mentioned. She feels that if she goes back to her homeland she can get back her life she feels she lost when she goes to England.

. Savitha feels isolated when she goes to England, she always has a longing for her home. She makes up her mind that she will not bring up her daughter according to the western way but according to her native way. The news of Sri Lanka's War always disturbs their minds thinking of the safety of their loved ones. "I have discovered that being part of an empire means you lose your individual and collective identity"(332) .

Tearne in all her novels has given an autobiographical touch to her characters. In each of the novel, the protagonist does have a trace of the writer herself. She explains the deep trauma of isolation, dislocation and discrimination the migrants feel when they move from their homeland to the host land. Though they develop a longing for an imaginary homeland in the host land the reality creates a deep void and makes them a secluded group. Tearne has portrayed the fact that though they long for their host land to be their homeland still it is not an easy deed for them to accept the fact and alter themselves. Tearne in the novels characterizes the young generation who search for their roots and return to their homeland as one's roots are always the solution for one's feeling of identity.

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